Article

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Mckee, Tina ORCID: 0000-0003-2011-6927 (2021) Can’t come, won’t come, don’t come: supporting better attendance and attainment of first year law students through an Early Intervention Pilot. The Law Teacher . ISSN 0306-9400

It is advisable to refer to the publisher’s version if you intend to cite from the work.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069400.2021.1908012

The Law Teacher

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ralt20

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To cite this article: Tina McKee (2021): Can't come, won't come, don't come: supporting better attendance and attainment of first year law students through an Early Intervention Pilot, The Law Teacher, DOI: 10.1080/03069400.2021.1908012

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03069400.2021.1908012

Published online: 30 Jun 2021.

THE LAW TEACHER
https://doi.org/10.1080/03069400.2021.1908012

Can't come, won't come, don't come: supporting better attendance and attainment of first year law students through an Early Intervention Pilot

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the effectiveness of an Early Intervention Pilot (EIP) with year 1 law students in Lancashire Law School, UCLan in 2018–19. The initiative was designed to address concerns over attendance and attainment identified in a previous School project. The EIP used non-attendance thresholds to trigger early intervention student meetings with Course Leaders to explore reasons for absence and to offer appropriate advice and signposting. Quantitative analysis of EIP data reveals improvements in both attendance and attainment for the cohort when compared with an earlier cohort. Additional findings reveal benefits in early identification of significant numbers of students with a range of needs, allowing for more effective signposting to sources of support during their first semester. This article contributes to the literature in exploring the impact of an early intervention approach within a law school context and in revealing the scale and depth of complex student needs.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 22 December 2020; Accepted 22 March 2021

KEYWORDS Early intervention; attendance; engagement; attainment; wellbeing

Introduction

As a law teacher, I want students to thrive at law school, to actively engage with their studies and to learn how to keep going when the going gets tough. I want them to stretch their brains to accommodate new knowledge, understanding and skills. I want them to build friendships that will last a lifetime and to move on from higher education (HE) with a vision and confidence about how they can live and work meaningfully in the world. No doubt, these aspirations are shared by other law teachers and many of us will have witnessed first-hand the transformational potential of a law degree for students from a range of diverse backgrounds.

It is therefore frustrating when so many of our students, having signed up for a law degree, seem to opt out of even the most basic requirements of attendance, individual preparation and active participation in classes. The challenge is to understand why this happens and to create a structure and environment which maximises learning and minimises disengagement.

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This article reports on the results of an Early Intervention Pilot (EIP) with year 1 law students in Lancashire Law School (LLS) at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan).[1] The EIP was designed as a teaching and learning intervention to test whether a structured policy of student attendance with clear expectations and early intervention for non-attendance could support better student performances.[2] It was hoped that if good attendance habits were established in year 1, these benefits would roll forward into the later years of the degree. We used student attendance as an indicator for student engagement and participation because this was the most reliable measure available to us at the time and in practical terms, we could identify patterns of non-attendance very early in the programme and intervene with individual students accordingly.[3]

Background

Attendance and attainment

Much has been written on the links between student attendance and attainment and research indicates a strong correlation between attendance rates and academic performance in higher education.[4] Students with higher rates of attendance tend to gain higher marks in assessments when compared with students who have lower rates of attendance.[5] This correlation is evident for both large group teaching sessions such as lectures[6] as well as small group classes such as tutorials or workshops.[7] Previous research in LLS provides a strong evidence base supporting this correlation.[8] However, the critical question is whether the relationship between attendance and attainment is causal, i.e. do students perform better in assessments *because* they attend more, or do students who perform better in assessments happen to be students who just attend more?

[1]Subsumed into the School of Justice in August 2020.

[2]Tina McKee and Rachel Nir, "The Participation Puzzle" project, 2016–18.

[3]Data from 2016–17, gathered as part of the Participation Puzzle project, was used as a baseline comparator.

[4]David Romer's early study demonstrated this in his research into "absenteeism" from economics classes in three elite US universities – see David Romer, "Do Students Go to Class? Should They?" (1993) 7(3) Journal of Economic Perspectives 167; see also Stephen Devadoss and John Foltz's widescale study over four American universities – Stephen Devadoss and John Foltz, "Evaluation of Factors Influencing Student Class Attendance and Performance" (1996) 78 American Journal of Agricultural Economics 499; see further Loretta Newman-Ford and others, "A Large-Scale Investigation into the Relationship between Attendance and Attainment: A Study Using an Innovative, Electronic Attendance Monitoring System" (2008) 33 Studies in Higher Education 699; Lillian Corbin, Kylie Burns and April Chrzanowski, "If You Teach It, Will They Come? Law Students, Class Attendance and Student Engagement" (2010) 20 Legal Education Review 13; Zaid Al-Shammari, "Enhancing Higher Education Student Attendance through Classroom Management" (2016) 3 Cogent Education, Article 1210488.

[5]Newman-Ford and others (n 2); Corbin, Burns and Chrzanowski (n 2).

[6]Romer (n 2); Peter Massingham and Tim Herrington, "Does Attendance Matter? An Examination of Student Attitudes, Participation, Performance and Attendance" (2006) 3 Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice 82; Newman-Ford and others (n 2); Luca Stanca, "The Effects of Attendance on Academic Performance: Panel Data Evidence for Introductory Microeconomics" (2006) 37 The Journal of Economic Education 251; Al-Shammari (n 2).

[7]Massingham and Herrington (n 4).

[8]The Participation Puzzle (PP) was a mixed methods research project led by Rachel Nir, Reader in Legal Education and Inclusion, School of Justice, UCLan, and Tina McKee. LLS data from 2016-18 was analysed for the PP and showed a statistically significant correlation (sig = .000) between attendance and attainment. See Tina McKee, "The Participation Puzzle: Research Report on Student Attendance, Attainment and Experience within Lancashire Law School, UCLan (2016-2018)" (2021) <https://www5.uclan.ac.uk/sites/ImageBank/Marketing_Image_Library/The_Participation_Puzzle.pdf> accessed 23 May 2021.

In response to this question, there is a body of evidence supporting the premise that attendance rates are an important *predictor* of student assessment performance[9] (even when controlling for other factors).[10]

Engagement and attainment

We know that attendance is not the whole picture, it is merely one indicator of a student's level of engagement with their studies. Some have argued that attendance rates are less important than active engagement in learning both inside and outside the classroom in terms of predicting success.[11] Unfortunately, student engagement or participation is a factor that is very difficult to measure reliably.[12] For pragmatic reasons, we therefore chose to use measures of attendance in the EIP as an indicator of student engagement or participation.

Factors affecting attendance and engagement

There are many factors that affect student attendance and engagement, and these can be categorised in different ways. Dolnicar and others divide factors into university-related and student-related factors.[13] Student-related factors can also be further categorised into exogenous (i.e. factors outside the remit of the university that nonetheless have an impact on studies) or endogenous (i.e. factors that relate to students' attitudes, capacity and motivations).[14] However, it is an extremely complex picture and the links between these factors frequently overlap.

[9]David Romer concluded in his study that "there is a very strong statistical relationship between absenteeism and performance, and the evidence is consistent with the view that this relationship has an important causal component": Romer (n 2) 173; Wiji Arulampalam, Robin A Naylor and Jeremy Smith used quantile regression to identify that absence had adverse effects on student performance. However, these effects were only causal for the highest performing students – see Wiji Arulampalam, Robin A Naylor and Jeremy Smith, "Am I Missing Something? The Effects of Absence from Class on Student Performance" (2012) 31 Economics of Education Review 363.

[10]Luca Stanca found that even when controlling for student characteristics such as ability, effort and motivation, attendance still had a statistically significant effect on student learning – see Stanca (n 4); see also Devadoss and Foltz (n 2); Daniel Marburger, "Does Mandatory Attendance Improve Student Performance?" (2006) 37 The Journal of Economic Education 148. However, other research suggests that interventions to increase attendance do not always increase student performance: Joan Rodgers introduced a penalty system for missed tutorials to incentivise students to attend better. She concluded that "the incentive scheme did not improve students' performance. Students attended more classes but did not perform better" – see Joan Rodgers, "Encouraging Tutorial Attendance at University Did Not Improve Performance" (2002) 41 Australian Economic Papers 255, 265.

[11]Massingham and Herrington (n 4).

[12]There are several software systems that aim to measure student engagement through analysing data streams relating to student usage of virtual learning platforms and other resources in conjunction with attendance data to give a "score" of student engagement (eg Solutionpath Ltd's STREAM software <www.solutionpath.co.uk/stream/> accessed 19 December 2020). If these systems become more established, it would be interesting to consider whether attendance is the factor with the strongest correlation with attainment or whether a combination of factors and relative weightings can give more accurate predictors of student outcomes.

[13]Sara Dolnicar and others, "Can Australian Universities Take Measures to Increase the Lecture Attendance of Marketing Students?" (2009) 31 Journal of Marketing Education 203.

[14]Arulampalam, Naylor and Smith (n 7).

University-related factors include the quality of teaching[15] and tutor–student relationships,[16] the extent to which students can access module resources online,[17] whether the module is compulsory or optional,[18] timetabling issues,[19] class size[20] and upcoming assessment deadlines.[21] Exogenous student-related factors include concurrent student employment,[22] finance,[23] caring responsibilities,[24] health issues[25] and transport problems.[26] Endogenous student-related factors include intrinsic motivation,[27] levels of stress,[28] organisational skills[29] and ability. Past performance of students can be a useful indicator of such endogenous factors.[30] It has been argued that endogenous factors are the most significant in predicting student success in assessment performance.[31]

Both exogenous and endogenous student-related factors may have an impact on student wellbeing. Over recent years, the sector has become aware of the increasing numbers of students disclosing mental health issues or seeking wellbeing support.[32] The increasing demand on university support services causes resourcing issues for

[15]Roy Khong and others report that one-third of their study sample "acknowledged that they would not attend lectures if they had difficulty following the lecture content or found it uninteresting" – see Roy Khong and others, "Why Do Students Attend Lectures?: Exploring Justifications for Attendance among Undergraduate Students from a British University in Asia" (2016) 50(5) The Journal of Developing Areas 497, 504; see also Devadoss and Foltz (n 2); Paul Friedman, Fred Rodriguez and Joe McComb, "Why Students Do and Do Not Attend Classes: Myths and Realities" (2001) 49 College Teaching 124; Massingham and Herrington (n 4).

[16]Rita Kottasz, "Reasons for Student Non-Attendance at Lectures and Tutorials: An Analysis" (2005) 2(2) Investigations in University Teaching and Learning 5.

[17]See Khong and others (n 13) although Mark Grabe reports that there was no significant difference in assessment performance between students who admitted to using online class notes as an alternative to attendance, and those who claimed not to use notes in this way – see Mark Grabe, "Voluntary Use of Online Lecture Notes: Correlates of Note Use and Note Use as an Alternative to Class Attendance" (2005) 44 Computers and Education 409.

[18]Devadoss and Foltz (n 2).

[19]Khong and others (n 13).

[20]Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb found that "the larger the class, the more students were absent" – see Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (n 13) 129.

[21]Khong and others report that male students are more likely to give coursework completion as a reason for missing classes than female students – see Khong and others (n 13).

[22]Devadoss and Foltz (n 2).

[23]Devadoss and Foltz found that students who were self-financing attended better and achieved higher grades – see Devadoss and Foltz (n 2).

[24]Sandra Winn, "Student Motivation: A Socio-economic Perspective" (2002) 27 Studies in Higher Education 445.

[25]Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (n 13).

[26]Kottasz (n 14).

[27]Devadoss and Foltz (n 2); Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (n 13); Kottasz (n 14).

[28]Kottasz (n 14).

[29]There is evidence that some students struggle with time management skills – see Kottasz (n 14).

[30]Devadoss and Foltz found a "strong and positive relationship between prior GPA [grade point average] and class attendance and performance, underscoring that prior GPA is an important predictor of undergraduate students' innate skills and abilities through class attendance, note taking, comprehension, and study habits" – see Devadoss and Foltz (n 2) 506; see also Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (n 13); Massingham and Herrington (n 4).

[31]Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb found that students were more intrinsically motivated to both attend and learn when they had chosen an elective course (module) – see Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (n 13) 129; Massingham and Herrington conclude that "health and lifestyle factors are barriers to tutorial *attendance* and lack of interest or motivation are barriers to tutorial *learning*" (emphasis added) – see Massingham and Herrington (n 4) 96.

[32]Craig Thorley, "Not by Degrees: Improving Student Mental Health in the UK's Universities" (Institute for Public Policy Research, September 2017) <www.ippr.org/files/2017-09/1504645674_not-by-degrees-170905.pdf> accessed 10 December 2020; see June Brown's editorial for a brief overview of the issue – June Brown, "Student Mental Health: Some Answers and More Questions" (2018) 27 Journal of Mental Health 193.

institutions and can have an impact on academic staff as well.[33] Students in mental health crisis or distress may find it more difficult to establish social support networks with others on their course and are perhaps less likely to attend classes or to perform well in assessments.[34] Evidence from law schools in Australia and the US also suggests that the mental health of law students is worse than that of students in other disciplines. This has been attributed to several factors including the competitive culture of some law schools.[35]

Ways to improve student attendance and engagement

If we are persuaded by the evidence that there is a causal link underpinning the strong correlation between student attendance and attainment – that for at least some students, encouraging better attendance may improve their assessment performance – then there are a range of possible strategies to support students into attending more. A key approach that may support better attendance is early intervention – identifying non-attending students before it is too late and offering one-to-one support to identify specific challenges and offer signposting and practical guidance.[36]

There are mixed views on whether attendance should be compulsory in higher education. Some would argue in favour of this[37] as it helps to set clear expectations for students,[38] particularly where there are clear consequences for poor attendance.[39] There is some evidence that explicit messaging about the importance of attendance for academic success can improve attendance.[40] However, opposing views suggest that institutions should recognise students as adults,

[33]Gareth Hughes and others report that academic staff are often the first point of contact for students seeking mental health support. If institutional support services are under pressure, academic staff may find themselves plugging the gaps, which can be detrimental to their own wellbeing – see Gareth Hughes and others, "Student Mental Health: The Role and Experiences of Academics" (Student Minds, January 2018) 58 <www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/180129_student_mental_health__the_role_and_experience_of_academics__student_minds_pdf.pdf> accessed 20 December 2020.

[34]Christine Hardy and Colin Bryson, "The Salience of Social Relationships and Networks in Enabling Student Engagement and Success" (2016) 1(1) Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal 1; Jeremy Oldfield and others, "Psychological and Demographic Predictors of Undergraduate Non-Attendance at University Lectures and Seminars" (2018) 42 Journal of Further and Higher Education 509.

[35]For example, see Kennon M Sheldon and Lawrence S Krieger, "Does Legal Education Have Undermining Effects on Law Students? Evaluating Changes in Motivation, Values, and Well-Being" (2004) 22 Behavioral Sciences and the Law 261; Norm Kelk and others, *Courting the Blues: Attitudes towards Depression in Australian Law Students and Lawyers* (Brain & Mind Research Institute Monograph 2009-1, January 2009) <https://law.uq.edu.au/files/32510/Courting-the-Blues.pdf> accessed 21 December 2020; but Emma Jones, Rajvinder Samra and Mathijs Lucassen's study with Open University distance learning students indicated different reasons for low levels of law student wellbeing – see Emma Jones, Rajvinder Samra and Mathijs Lucassen, "The World at Their Fingertips? The Mental Wellbeing of Online Distance-Based Law Students" (2019) 53 The Law Teacher 49.

[36]Newman-Ford and others (n 2).

[37]Marburger noted a statistically significant, but not substantial, impact on increasing performance through enforcing compulsory attendance – see Marburger (n 8); see also Romer (n 2).

[38]Clear expectations are often central to strategies supporting good student attendance and engagement – see Al-Shammari (n 2); see also Devadoss and Foltz (n 2).

[39]Minimum attendance rates may also be required by professional regulatory bodies for some vocational degrees, eg nursing; and international students are subject to strict attendance monitoring and reporting regimes under the UK Visa and Immigration framework governing "student permission" (formerly "Tier 4 student leave").

[40]Randy Moore, "Does Improving Developmental Education Students' Understanding of the Importance of Class Attendance Improve Students' Attendance and Academic Performance?" (2004) 20(2) Research and Teaching in Developmental Education 24.

capable of managing their studies within the context of other competing demands on their time.[41] It could be further argued that adult students as "consumers", having paid for their courses in a marketised HE sector, should be free to choose when and what to attend. However, a significant number of undergraduate students in England pay their tuition fees through student loans.[42] It is suggested that this gives rise to an obligation on students to attend the classes for which they are borrowing money, and on universities to monitor and support their attendance.

The debate may be influenced by underlying perceptions of students' motivations for study. For example, self-determination theory[43] suggests that students' learning and wellbeing are affected by their motivations.[44] Those influenced by "autonomous motivation" are more likely to perform better, to be more persistent and to have better psychological health than those influenced by "controlled motivation" or by "amotivation".[45] If we can support students to develop more "autonomous motivation",[46] the likelihood is that both attendance and attainment will improve. The role of individual tutors in challenging and supporting students is therefore recognised as essential, particularly for developing confidence, and more intrinsic or autonomous motivations for study.[47]

Other strategies to support better attendance focus on promoting better engagement within the classroom through participatory learning[48] or collaborative approaches to agreeing attendance policies;[49] and through ensuring that classes are constructively aligned[50] with assessments,[51] e.g. through face-to-face clarification on assessment criteria, and advice on effective preparation for assessments.[52]

[41]Despite Stanca's findings that attendance has a causal effect on learning, he argues strongly against compulsory attendance, "a captive audience is not a good learning environment" – see Stanca (n 4) 264; see also Marburger (n 8).

[42]In 2018/19, approximately 1,107,000 undergraduate students in England received student loans for tuition fees from the Student Loans Company – see Table 1 in Paul Bolton, "House of Commons Briefing Paper Number 1079, 9 December 2020: Student Loan Statistics" (House of Commons Library, 2020) <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01079/> accessed 14 December 2020.

[43]Edward Deci and Richard Ryan have been instrumental in defining and developing self-determination theory (SDT) as a macrotheory of human motivation since the 1980s. SDT posits that different types of motivation are important in predicting outcomes including "deep or conceptual learning" and "psychological health and well-being" – see Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, "Self-Determination Theory: A Macrotheory of Human Motivation, Development, and Health" (2008) 49 Canadian Psychology 182, 182.

[44]Christopher Niemiec and Richard Ryan, "Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness in the Classroom: Applying Self-Determination Theory to Educational Practice" (2009) 7 Theory and Research in Education 133.

[45]Deci and Ryan define "autonomous motivation" as consisting of "both intrinsic motivation and the types of extrinsic motivation in which people have identified with an activity's value and ideally will have integrated it into their sense of self"; "controlled motivation" as consisting of "both external regulation, in which one's behaviour is a function of external contingencies of reward or punishment, and introjected regulation, in which the regulation of action has been partially internalized and is energized by factors such as an approval motive, avoidance of shame, contingent self-esteem, and ego-involvement"; and describe "amotivation" as "a lack of intention and motivation" – see Deci and Ryan (n 41) 182.

[46]Deci and Ryan (n 41).

[47]Devadoss and Foltz suggest that "instructors with proven teaching skills and experiences should be assigned to teach the introductory and core courses" – see Devadoss and Foltz (n 2) 506; tutors are also important in developing a sense of "relatedness" that helps students to internalise motivations for learning – see Niemiec and Ryan (n 42); see also Massingham and Herrington (n 4) and Jones, Samra and Lucassen (n 33).

[48]Oyegoke Bekoye and Anjali Shegunshi, "Impact of Engaging Teaching Model (ETM) on Students' Attendance" (2016) 3 Cogent Education, Article 1221191.

[49]Al-Shammari (n 2).

[50]John Biggs, "Enhancing Teaching through Constructive Alignment" (1996) 32 Higher Education 347.

[51]Khong and others (n 13).

[52]Mashood Baderin, "Towards Improving Students' Attendance and Quality of Undergraduate Tutorials: A Case Study on Law" (2005) 10 Teaching in Higher Education 99.

To ensure that students are benefiting from classes, mid-module feedback is advocated;[53] and other approaches to improving attendance can involve timetabling key classes on days and times when students are most likely to attend.[54]

There is mixed evidence as to the efficacy of attendance-improvement strategies based on students' extrinsic motivations. Use of random extra-credit quizzes[55] or attendance policies giving credit towards grades[56] may operate effectively to increase attendance rates. However, incentive schemes to improve attendance may not always correlate with improved performance.[57]

The Early Intervention Pilot

The Early Intervention Pilot (EIP) was an intervention designed in response to the findings of an earlier project, the Participation Puzzle (PP), undertaken in LLS in 2016– 18. The key findings from the PP were that there is a strong correlation between attendance and attainment; that students who enjoy their course, or who are strongly motivated to study, attend better; and that there is a broad range of factors affecting non-attendance. The relevant findings from the PP established that the average attendance of undergraduate students was 54%[58] and that there was a statistically significant correlation between attendance and attainment (in terms of module marks achieved).[59]

The primary aim of the EIP was to improve attendance and attainment and this article reports some improvement in both. A secondary aim of the EIP was to devise better systems for identifying factors contributing to non-attendance and offering tailored signposting and support to individual students accordingly. The findings below indicate that the EIP revealed high numbers of students with serious or complex circumstances affecting their attendance, and that we were able to signpost such students to sources of support at a much earlier stage of their courses than previously.

Before the EIP

UCLan has used a centralised digital "Student Attendance Monitoring" system for some years whereby students scan their student identity cards on entry to the classroom to register their attendance. At the time of the EIP, the institutional policy on attendance monitoring consisted of a three-stage process. Stage 1 was contact from the central student attendance monitoring team triggered by average attendance over a two-week period falling below 50%. This was by standardised email and required students to explain the reasons for their absence. If no satisfactory response was received, students were referred to their Academic Advisors[60]

[53]Harriet Dismore, Rebecca Turner and Rong Huang, "Let Me Edutain You! Practices of Student Engagement Employed by New Lecturers" (2019) 38 Higher Education Research & Development 235.
[54]Devadoss and Foltz suggest timetabling classes (especially important ones) between 10 am and 3 pm so that they are better attended – see Devadoss and Foltz (n 2); however, the findings of Friedman, Rodriquez and McComb do not support this approach – see Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (n 13).
[55]Devadoss and Foltz advocate this approach – see Devadoss and Foltz (n 2).
[56]Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (n 13).
[57]Rodgers (n 8).
[58]McKee (n 6). However, data from the Participation Puzzle also revealed that year 1 law students had a higher mean average attendance rate of 60%.
[59]Sig = .000, McKee (n 6).
[60]In the EIP period, all students in UCLan were allocated an Academic Advisor throughout their period of study. The role of the Academic Advisor was to provide academic support and signposting to Student Support Services as appropriate.

for a stage 2 meeting. At stage 2 meetings, Academic Advisors discussed reasons for non-attendance with the student and signposted them to any academic or other support that might be appropriate. If students did not attend the stage 2 meeting, or if their attendance continued to be poor, they were referred to the School Student Experience Lead for a more formal stage 3 meeting. Continuing non-attendance could lead to withdrawal of the student, although this happened infrequently.

This system seemed to contain several flaws. First, the initial contact was too late. Attendance monitoring did not start until after Welcome Week and then there were at least two weeks of attendance monitoring before non-attending students were contacted. Secondly, the level of attendance at which contact was triggered seemed too low, at 50%. The PP findings showed that the mean average attendance rate of undergraduate law students in the School who progressed (or graduated) at the end of the academic year 2016/17, without the need for resits, was much higher, at 60%.[61] Thirdly, the initial contact seemed very impersonal, as students received a standardised email from a "team" rather than a "person". Fourthly, if students responded to the initial email with a reasonable explanation for absence, e.g. short-term health issues, they were not flagged to the academic team. Unfortunately, where attendance remained poor, but students continued to respond to stage 1 emails with explanations, they seemed to get stuck in the stage 1 loop. This meant that stage 2 referrals to Academic Advisors could come at far too late a stage for them to support effective interventions with the students.

The EIP

The EIP was undertaken with year 1 undergraduate law students over semester 1 2018–19.[62] We adapted the Student Non-Attendance Policy (SNAP)[63] devised and trialled by Mark Poulter at the University of Ulster.[64] Poulter's SNAP provides explicit expectations of high levels of attendance from all students; early interventions by a senior member of staff where attendance issues are identified; and clear consequences for non-attendance.[65] Ulster's results were impressive in terms of increasing student attendance and in reducing student withdrawals.[66]

We adopted Poulter's SNAP so far as possible and secured permission to replace the centralised university system of attendance monitoring with the EIP for the year 1 law cohorts[67] for the period of the pilot. However, our institutional regulatory framework

[61]McKee (n 6).

[62]The original intention was to evaluate the findings from both semesters in 2018–19. However, although the pilot continued into semester 2, it was not possible to evaluate the semester 2 findings as some classes were timetabled in rooms with faulty or absent attendance scanners, leading to unreliable attendance data.

[63]We were first introduced to Mark Poulter's SNAP system through his conference paper – Mark Poulter, "Improving Student Non-Attendance and Retention in a SNAP (Student Non-Attendance Policy)" (Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference: Teaching in the Spotlight: Learning from Global Communities, Aston Conference Centre, 3–5 July 2018).

[64]Mark Poulter, "Improving Class Attendance and Student Retention: It's a (Physio) SNAP!" (2016) 7 Perspectives on Pedagogy and Practice 33.

[65]The consequences were that students would not be allowed to attempt assessments where their attendance fell below a prescribed threshold unless they were able to satisfy the module leader that they had made good any missed work.

[66]Poulter (n 63) 41–47.

[67]LLB Law; LLB Law with Business; LLB Law with Criminology; LLB Law with International Studies; LLB Law with Psychology; and MLaw (year 1 MLaw students were included as their year 1 programme is identical to that of year 1 LLB Law students).

did not allow us to stop students attempting assessments where they had not met the required minimum module attendance threshold.[68]

The EIP team consisted of the two year 1 Course Leaders[69] and an administrative assistant[70] who managed the attendance data and student email notification system. The Course Leaders met with individual students to explore factors affecting attendance and offered tailored signposting and support.

At the outset of the academic year, we informed all students of the EIP system through face-to-face lectures, emails and information posted to the virtual learning environment (VLE). We were explicit about both the benefits of attending well (i.e. that students would be more likely to: perform better in assessments; build up good friendships with others on their course; seek advice and/or support from tutors as soon as issues arose) and the consequences of attending poorly (i.e. that they would be more likely to: perform less well in assessments; face potential progression issues; face potential withdrawal; face problems with securing good tutor references when seeking future employment or study opportunities).

Although student attendance data continued to be collected by the central university scanning system, the EIP administrative assistant took over responsibility for managing the data to trigger different stages of the EIP.[71] If students missed a class, she sent them an email asking them to complete a form explaining the reason for their absence, and asking for documentary evidence where appropriate. Students were emailed regularly with updates as to their levels of attendance.

If students missed three classes in any module (whatever the reason), they were invited to meet with one of the two Course Leaders. The initial purpose of these meetings was to ensure that students understood the attendance policy and the benefits of attending well. The meetings were predominantly open and exploratory, so that students had an opportunity to raise any questions or concerns in an explicitly supportive environment. It became apparent very early in the EIP that the meetings offered students an opportunity to raise and discuss underlying issues that were preventing them from attending. This allowed the Course Leaders to advise them appropriately and to signpost them to relevant sources of support. Action plans were agreed between the student and the Course Leader at the end of the meeting.[72] If students missed a further two classes in the same module, they were asked to come to a second, more formal, meeting with the Course Leader. At this point the action plan was revisited and adapted as needed. Meetings were predominantly face to face but were sometimes via telephone.

Students with continuing absences, and who were not availing themselves of the support that had been offered, were referred to the School Student Experience Lead, for discussions about the appropriateness of withdrawal from the course.

[68]This restriction seems to have been used to good effect by Poulter and other colleagues at Ulster University. Students who fall below pre-set threshold attendance levels are prevented from attempting assessments unless they demonstrate to their module leaders that they have caught up with missed work appropriately.

[69]Tina McKee and Linda Chadderton.

[70]Nazneen Asmal.

[71]Mark Poulter kindly adapted his Excel spreadsheet system (incorporating different stages of the process and automated email notifications) for the purposes of the EIP in LLS.

[72]These action plans contained eg agreement to attend classes or to give advance notification of any unavoidable absences; to catch up with missed work; to seek support from the School Academic Coach, module team or central University Support Services.

Methods

As a teaching and learning intervention, it was important to evaluate the efficacy of the EIP. Therefore, quantitative analysis of a range of different data was used to compare the position before the EIP, with that resulting from it. It would have been ideal to supplement this quantitative analysis with qualitative data collection and analysis. However, this was beyond the resourcing capacity and scope of the EIP team.

Data from the PP in 2016/17 provided a baseline from which to compare the EIP data from 2018/19. Datasets were compiled for year 1 students[73] on full-time law programmes-[74] for semester 1 modules in these two academic years. There were 149 students in the 2016–17 dataset and 145 students in the 2018–19 dataset. The demographics of these students were broadly similar for both cohorts.[75]

For each student, data was collated for both their attendance and attainment. A mean average attendance rate was calculated for each student as a percentage of the total compulsory semester 1 classes in the relevant modules. Each student's attainment was measured by calculating their mean average percentage mark (APM) from the relevant semester 1 modules. Data was also gathered with respect to the number of students seen by the Course Leaders under the EIP in semester 1 2018–19.[76] Data relating to extenuating circumstances applications and approvals, together with data relating to referrals to a range of student support services,[77] was compared for the two periods.

The datasets were predominantly analysed as Excel spreadsheets using Excel formulae for descriptive statistics. However, data relating to the correlation between attendance and attainment for both cohorts was analysed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, using regression analysis.

Findings

Under the EIP, the two Course Leaders contacted 46%[78] of the 2018–19 student cohort over the course of semester 1 for stage 1 meetings and 26%[79] for stage 2 meetings. Each meeting was scheduled for 20 minutes face to face. If students did not attend, we called them and held the meeting over the telephone. If we could not get hold of them, the meetings were rescheduled. Owing to the numbers of students being called for meetings under the EIP, this proved to be a very resource intensive use of time for the Course Leaders.

[73]Year 1 students were those who were attempting year 1 for the first time (ie excluding students who were resitting, re-registered for modules or first sitting modules due to deferrals as a result of approved extenuating circumstances in the previous academic year). Students on non-law programmes, part-time programmes and exchange students were also excluded.

[74]See n 66.

[75]Approximately two-thirds female and one-third male; approximately half from black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds and half from white backgrounds; approximately 95% home students and 5% European or overseas students; approximately four-fifths aged under 21 and one-fifth aged 21 and over; and approximately 15% with a declared disability and 85% with no declared disability.

[76]There was no true 2016–17 comparator for this data as the EIP system of Course Leader meetings was very different from the pre-EIP system of Academic Advisor meetings. A flaw of the pre-EIP system was that there were inconsistent approaches and record-keeping by Academic Advisors which made it impossible to establish how many students had been seen, and by whom, for issues relating to attendance in semester 1 2016–17.

[77]These included in-School referrals to the Academic Coach, and referrals to central University Student Support Services (Inclusive Support Team; Wellbeing, Counselling and Mental Health Team; Student Finance Support Team; and Student Accommodation Service).

[78]67 of the 145 students.

[79]38 of the 145 students.

Increase in attendance and APM

The findings show that there was an increase in both attendance and attainment for the EIP cohort when compared with the pre-EIP cohort. Figure 1 shows the mean average rate of attendance at compulsory classes, together with the mean average APM,[80] for both cohorts, demonstrating the increase in both measures.[81]

Correlation between attendance and APM

SPSS was used to explore correlations between attendance and APM for both cohorts. One-way ANOVA testing demonstrated extremely strong and statistically significant[82] correlations between attendance and APM for both cohorts. These correlations are illustrated in Figure 2 (pre-EIP) and Figure 3 (EIP). On each figure, the "line of best fit"[83] illustrates this positive correlation, with APMs increasing as attendance rates increase.

Increase in referral rates to University Student Support Services[84]

There was a significant increase in the numbers of Course Leader referrals to support services from the pre-EIP period to the EIP period.

It is not known how many students had conversations with either a Course Leader or an Academic Advisor in semester 1 2016–17 about concerns over their wellbeing, mental health, inclusive support or finance.[85] However, the data shows that only one student from this cohort was referred to the University Student Support Services in this period by the Course Leader.[86] However, in semester 1 2018–19, as part of the EIP meetings triggered by non-attendances, the Course Leaders discussed such issues and concerns with almost one-third of the whole cohort. For 15 of these students, the Course Leaders made a formal referral to Student Support Services (with referrals to more than one service for some of them). Details of the different concerns discussed in the meetings, and the formal referrals arising from them, are shown in Table 1.

Increase in referral rates to the School Academic Coach

In the School we have an Academic Coach. Her role is to engage in a coaching relationship with students who may need additional support for a range of reasons.[87] The primary focus is on academic support, but anecdotally, there is often a strong overlap between this aspect and pastoral care for some students.

There is no record of how many students had conversations with their Course Leader, Academic Advisor or module tutors in semester 1 2016–17 about academic

[80]Calculated as the mean average APM of semester 1 modules that ran in each academic year.
[81]Attendance increased from 60% to 64%; APM increased from 54% to 56%.
[82]Sig = .000 for both cohorts.
[83]R^2 Linear = 0.409 for pre-EIP (2016–17) and 0.314 for EIP (2018–19).
[84]Student Support Services include the Wellbeing, Counselling and Mental Health team; the Inclusive Support team; the Accommodation team; and the Financial Support team.
[85]No consistent records relating to such conversations are available from the pre-EIP period.
[86]This student was referred to the Wellbeing, Counselling and Mental Health team.
[87]Students may be referred to the Academic Coach by their Course Leader, or any other tutor, for a range of reasons, eg failing assessments, catching up with work missed through ill health; development of time management and revision strategies; building confidence in managing their studies, etc.

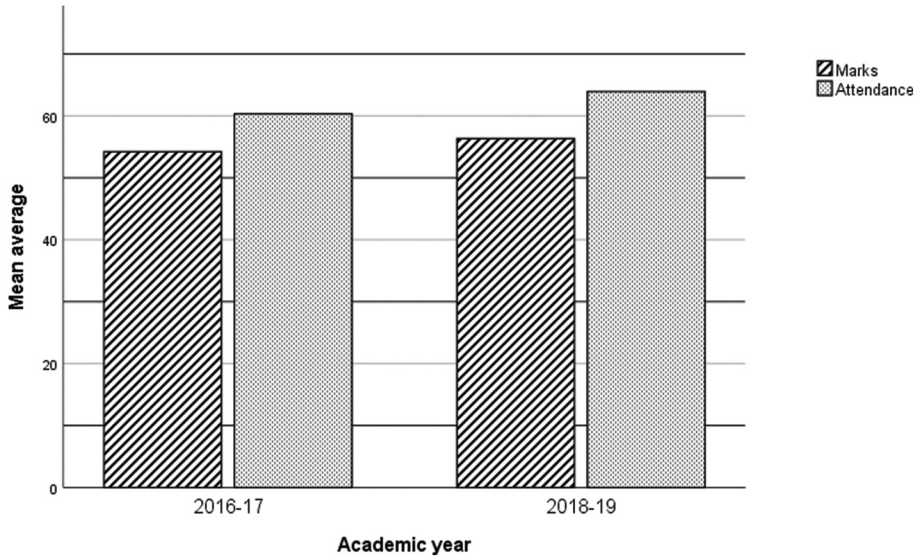

Figure 1. Comparison of mean attendance rates and APMs from semester 1 in 2016–17 and 2018–19.

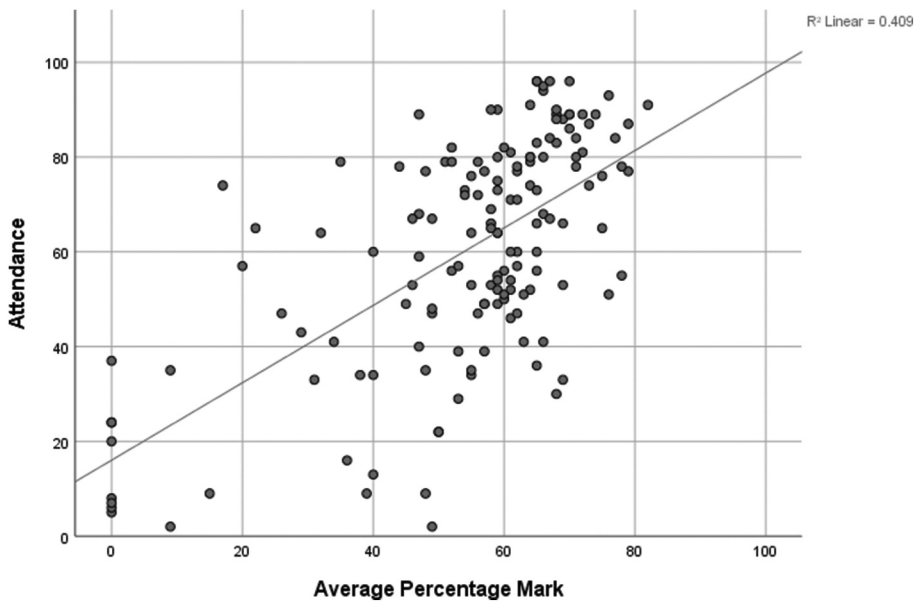

Figure 2. Pre-EIP (2016–17): correlation between attendance and APM.

issues.[88] Nonetheless, there are records to show that four students were referred to the Academic Coach during this period. In comparison, in semester 1 2018–19, following EIP meetings, the Course Leaders discussed academic issues and concerns with over one-

[88]No consistent records relating to such conversations were kept for the pre-EIP period.

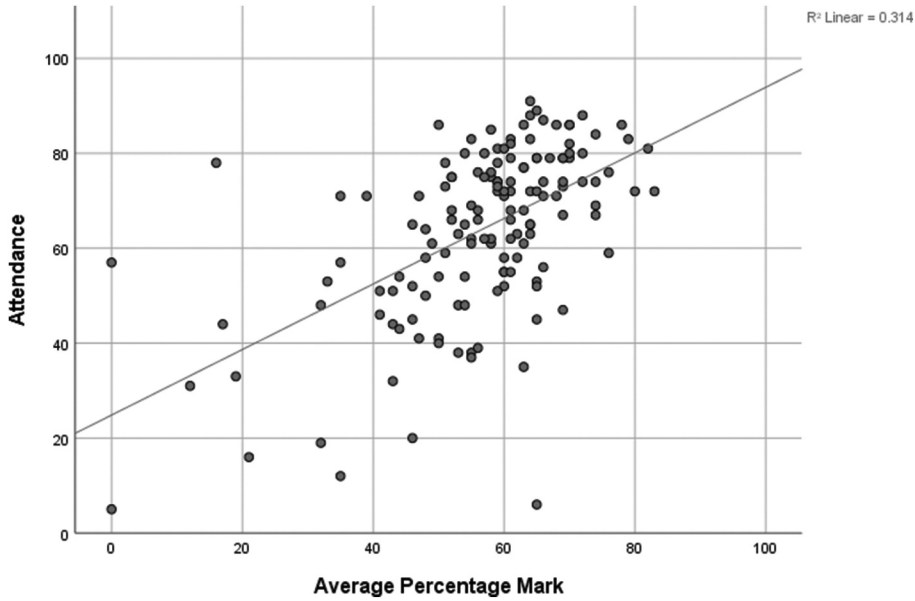

Figure 3. EIP (2018–19): correlation between attendance and APM.

Table 1. Students facing concerns and Course Leader referrals to Student Support Services.

	Students facing concerns which were discussed in EIP meetings	Formal Course Leader referrals to Student Support Services
Wellbeing issues	41 (28%*)	14 (10%*) – Wellbeing, Counselling and Mental Health Team
Inclusive support/ disability issues	15 (10%*)	6 (4%*) – Inclusive Support Team
Financial issues	6 (4%*)	3 (2%*) – Financial Support Team

*Percentage of total cohort of 145 students.

third of the whole cohort. One-quarter of the cohort were then referred to the Academic Coach for more formal academic support (a ninefold increase in referrals from the same period in 2016–17). Details of these conversations and referrals are shown in Table 2.

More effective use of the "extenuating circumstances" system

At UCLan, as in other universities, there is an "extenuating circumstances" (ECs) process[89] that allows students who are experiencing significant health or personal issues[90] to notify the university of the nature of their circumstances and of the potential negative impact on their studies and assessments.

[89]To apply for ECs, students complete an application form which is submitted, together with evidence, to an EC team based in an administrative Hub. The EC team notify the student and relevant academics of the outcome of the application.

[90]Some examples of ECs that may be approved include significant illness or injury, significant illness or death of a close family member, assault, etc. ECs do not include things such as holidays or planned events, computer or technical issues, or consequences of paid employment, etc.

Table 2. Students facing academic concerns and course leader referrals to the school academic coach.

	Students facing academic concerns which were discussed in EIP meetings	Formal Course Leader referral to the School Academic Coach
Academic issues	51 (35%*)	36 (25%*) **

*Percentage of total cohort of 145 students.
**In addition to the referrals to the Academic Coach, a further three students were referred to their module teams or the central University Study Support Service for academic support.

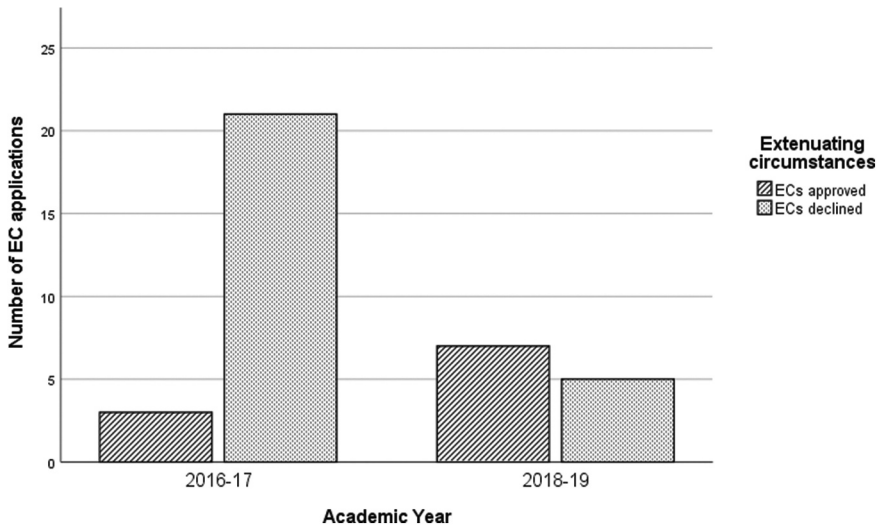

Figure 4. Comparison of EC decisions from semester 1 2016–17 and 2018–19.

In 2018–19, the Course Leaders counselled 20 year 1 students to submit ECs in semester 1. It was not possible to compare this with the figures from the same period in 2016–17 as there were no consistent records kept for these conversations.

However, using School data, it was possible to compare the number of EC applications submitted by students in semester 1 of both academic years. There was a significant increase in the number of *successful* EC applications (more than double the number of EC applications were approved in 2018–19 when compared with the same period in 2016–17) and a significant decrease in the number of *unsuccessful* EC applications (unsuccessful applications in 2018–19 were less than a quarter of those in 2016–17). This data is illustrated in Figure 4.

Discussion

The EIP was a small project designed as an intervention to address attendance and attainment challenges within the School as highlighted by the PP. As such, the post hoc analysis can offer interesting insights but only tentative conclusions.

This section will consider the findings described above and conclude that in addition to improvements in attainment and attendance during the EIP, other benefits of the project have emerged. These include a better understanding of the extent and

complexity of issues faced by a significant number of students which helps to give a richer picture of the context of the students and of the value of the EIP in terms of early signposting to support services at the outset of a student's transition into higher education.

Attendance and attainment

The findings reveal improvements in both the attendance rates and mean average APMs arising from the EIP. It is suggested that the EIP's strategic focus on improving attendance and offering early intervention meetings resulted in an increase in attendance rates for the EIP cohort. It is further suggested that this increase, together with effective Course Leader support and signposting, contributed to better student attainment. Owing to the small scale of the project, it is not possible to definitively state that this is the case, although this interpretation of the findings would reflect the wider literature demonstrating statistically significant correlations between attendance and attainment,[91] and the *causal* link between the two, i.e. better attendance contributing to better attainment.[92] This link seems logical when positing that if students are present in the classroom,[93] they are more likely to benefit academically (for example from asking questions, learning interactively[94] and gaining a clearer sense of assessment expectations)[95] as well as having better opportunities to develop the social networks which can sustain them through their studies.[96]

However, despite the increases in both attendance and attainment, our findings were not as definitive as those from Mark Poulter's SNAP scheme at Ulster University.[97] There are several possible explanations for this,[98] but one important factor may be that, despite the compulsory attendance policies in both contexts, there is a significant difference in institutional approaches to consequences for non-attendance.

When operating the EIP at UCLan, we were able to challenge and support students to improve their attendance through a structured set of meetings. However, the only consequence that we could impose for non-attendance under our institutional regulations was withdrawal from the course. This sanction is rare, and patterns of non-attendance must be extreme for it to be imposed. It is very much an "all-or-nothing" approach and anecdotal evidence indicates that our students perceive the attendance monitoring system as having "no teeth".

In contrast, Poulter was able to supplement his attendance meetings with tangible sanctions short of an "all-or-nothing" withdrawal, e.g. students falling below the prescribed attendance thresholds were not permitted to attempt assessments unless they demonstrated to the module leader that they had made good any missed learning.

[91]See n 2.
[92]Romer (n 2); Arulampalam, Naylor and Smith (n 7); Stanca (n 4); Marburger (n 8); Devadoss and Foltz (n 2).
[93]Whether on-campus or online.
[94]Bekoye and Shegunshi (n 46).
[95]Biggs (n 48); Khong and others (n 13).
[96]Hardy and Bryson (n 32).
[97]Poulter found that in the most recent iteration of the "Physio SNAP" reported (2013–14 intake), "no first 1st year student missed more than 30% of any one module in the subsequent five semesters" – see Poulter (n 63) 41; and retention figures improved with early leaver figures of 6.5–8.3% from 2010–12 (under the standard university attendance policy) dropping to 1.7–3.4% from 2013–14 to 2015–16 (under Poulter's Physio SNAP regime) – see Poulter (n 63) 45.
[98]Poulter's cohort was smaller and the physiotherapy course is very explicitly vocational.

Linking both attendance and learning directly to access to assessments gave students the coherent message that all classes are important and that it is their responsibility to catch up with any work missed through absences, whatever the reason.[99]

Although there may be challenges with such an approach,[100] it is one that I would advocate, particularly at the outset of students' transitions to university. If we wish students to take attendance more seriously, with benefits both for individual learning and for the wider cohort learning environment, we need to be seen to take attendance seriously at an institutional level. It seems counter-intuitive to espouse compulsory attendance policies without providing fair and realistic consequences for non-attendance. The transition to university can be a challenging time for many students as they struggle to find a sense of "belonging" and to manage their wellbeing.[101] Flexible attendance policies or attendance policies with "no teeth" may therefore place too much reliance on individual student attendance choices in this context. Our experience of the EIP, combined with evidence in the literature, indicates that it may benefit students to have a structured scaffolding of compulsory attendance requirements (and related sanctions) as they progress through their degrees,[102] with clear expectations from the outset.[103]

If we can inculcate better attendance habits in the first year of university, the need for non-attendance sanctions may dwindle as students take on more responsibility for their own study choices in later years of their degrees.

Better wellbeing awareness and improved signposting to Student Support Services

It is difficult to quantify the value of the EIP in terms of a standard costs–benefit analysis. The staff resources involved in running the EIP required substantial time commitments from both the Course Leaders and the EIP administrator and we were fortunate to be supported in this through workload allowances.

However, the student-centred aspect of the EIP was invaluable in terms of revealing the scale and complexity of student life circumstances. Having worked with students as a Course Leader and Academic Advisor over many years, I was aware of the types of underlying issues that some faced. However, the EIP gave our School far greater insight into the numbers of students affected and the extent of their challenges.

Some students freely admitted to absences due to endogenous student-related issues (for example: lack of motivation to attend; choosing to prioritise social lives over their studies; or an inability to manage time effectively as part of the transition to higher education) but fewer reported absences due to university-related issues than anticipated (e.g. boring topics; dislike of particular tutors; or timetabling at 9 am). However, our findings revealed a much higher number of serious exogenous student-related issues than we had expected. Many meetings involved discussions relating to challenging mental health issues, complex home

[99]Poulter (n 63) 38–39.
[100]Eg the logistics of enforcing the system, ensuring consistency in module leaders' decisions as to who can take assessments, supporting students with genuine reasons for longer-term absences, etc.
[101]Richard Cooke and others, "Measuring, Monitoring and Managing the Psychological Well-being of First Year University Students" (2006) 34 British Journal of Guidance and Counselling 505; Oldfield and others (n 32).
[102]This approach is advocated by Corbin, Burns and Chrzanowski (n 2).
[103]Romer (n 2); Devadoss and Foltz (n 2); Marburger (n 8); Al-Shammari (n 2).

backgrounds, difficult caring responsibilities, domestic violence, undisclosed disabilities and serious financial issues.[104] The value of the early intervention approach was that absences were often an early indicator of such underlying issues. The EIP enabled us to "intervene early": to meet students as soon as non-attendance was flagged, to get to know them a little, to seek to understand their individual contexts and then to signpost them quickly to appropriate sources of support. This resulted in the significant increases in early referrals to Student Services, and numbers of approved EC applications, as reported in our findings above. For some, the extent of the issues disclosed was so serious that we knew a "quick fix" would not be possible. Attendance at class and engagement with study were understandably not the highest priorities for them at this point in their lives. Nonetheless, we could at least be satisfied that we had directed them quickly to appropriate services for more sustained and specialist support. Anecdotally, we have evidence of year 1 students from the 2018–19 cohort who would not have been able to continue their studies without the benefit of such early and ongoing tailored support.

One advantage of having a small, focused EIP team was that we became practised at robust kindness, i.e. showing empathy to students in need while challenging them with clear targets and realistic action plans to improve their attendance and engagement. We developed a thorough knowledge base of the range and remit of University Support Services and developed relationships with key staff within them; we learned what questions to ask and where to draw the boundaries as to what we could do, what the university could do and what was beyond our scope; and we became more efficient and streamlined in our approach.[105]

However, it is important to recognise the emotional impact on staff of dealing with students in distress or in crisis on a regular basis. As a close-knit team, we were able to mutually debrief and to check in with colleagues in the Support Services as to whether we had given sound advice and made appropriate referrals. Our experience of distressing student interactions reflects that reported by Gareth Hughes and others in their analysis of the impact of student mental health issues on academics.[106] We would certainly support their recommendations for mental health training for academics, closer relationships between academics and Student Support Services and clear access to support for academics for managing the "substantive, negative impact" on their own wellbeing.[107]

Other reflections

Our learning from the EIP has now fed into an institutional early intervention system, which is currently being piloted. A separate initiative has also arisen from the relationships that we developed with our University Wellbeing, Counselling and Mental Health Services as a result of the EIP. Once we became aware of the scale of the wellbeing needs of our year 1 cohorts in 2018–19[108] and having developed effective, but

[104]The non-attendance forms proved a useful early indicator of such issues which allowed us to manage student meetings with sensitivity.
[105]This reflects many of the good practice recommendations from Gareth Hughes and others – see Gareth Hughes and others (n 31).
[106]Gareth Hughes and others (n 31).
[107]Gareth Hughes and others (n 31) 58.
[108]We continued to make high numbers of referrals beyond the semester 1 EIP data analysis period throughout the rest of 2018/19 and continue to do so now.

ultimately reactive, systems of signposting for support, we realised that we needed a more proactive approach. Consequently, we are now working in partnership on a School–Service project to embed wellbeing and resilience as an integral part of the year 1 curriculum and more broadly across the School.

Our experience from the EIP reflects that of the sector more widely as we become increasingly aware of many complex and intersecting issues that affect the lives of students such as mental health challenges, lack of social capital, skills gaps, inclusive support needs, financial pressures, caring responsibilities and family breakdown. Within our School, we are currently part way through a period of curriculum redesign, offering an opportunity to move away from a single focus on delivering module content and towards a more holistic and engaging approach to supporting and challenging our students. The EIP has played an important role in influencing this curriculum redesign.

Limitations

The EIP was a small project affecting 145 first year law students. As it was designed as an intervention rather than a research study, the evaluation of the project was based on post hoc quantitative analysis of project data. The findings are therefore limited in terms of scale, time period and methodology and as such, would bear further inquiry. The context of the lived experiences of our students is diverse and complex with a myriad of factors that potentially affect attendance, attainment and wellbeing. Further research using qualitative methodologies would give better insight. Although good practice has emerged from previous studies, there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach that is universally accepted. As the EIP formed one intervention within a wider ongoing curriculum redesign project, we hope to evaluate the impacts of early intervention more broadly through mixed methods analysis in the future in order to contribute further to the discussion.

Conclusion

The EIP findings demonstrated many benefits of using a structured and explicit attendance policy to support early intervention meetings between students and Course Leaders. Importantly, these included improvements in both attendance and attainment rates for students. An advantage of using a small number of experienced staff to conduct the early intervention meetings was that we developed an effective "robust kindness" approach: on the one hand reinforcing course expectations and requirements, while on the other hand identifying both academic and welfare support needs at a very early stage. This then led to effective early signposting of students to appropriate Support Services both within and beyond the School.

The EIP enabled us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the complex life circumstances of some of our students and this has since contributed to innovations and developments in our curriculum and learning environment such as embedding proactive student wellbeing initiatives and developing "friendly classrooms".

Nonetheless, the resource implications of the EIP were high, requiring significant staff time, skill development and emotional awareness. To support further integration of the early intervention approach, it is suggested that a small team of key staff from the course team should be tasked with this important role, given appropriate workload allowances and training (including mental health training) and provided with structured

systems for staff debriefing to support their own wellbeing. The effectiveness of the EIP might be further enhanced by introducing more robust systems of sanctions for non-attendance, particularly in the first year of university, to gain greater credibility and traction with students.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to my colleagues Linda Chadderton and Nazneen Asmal who both worked extremely hard to implement and refine the EIP and to contribute to the collation of EIP data for analysis. Our Academic Coach, Kathy Bullough, also played an invaluable role in supporting year 1 students referred to her through the EIP. I am also grateful to LLS for supporting this project. Further thanks go to the journal editors and anonymous reviewers for their encouraging and helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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